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When the towers fell

GRETCHEN METZ, Staff Writer

WEST WHITELAND -- The course of a life can change in a matter of minutes.

Five years ago, World Trade Mortgage founder Sean M. Phelan was barely out of college. He was 22 and in New York City on his second day of training to become a Morgan Stanley broker.

The date was Sept. 11, 2001.

Today he owns a company named for the pivotal day that would forever change his life.

"I wanted it to stare me in the face every single day," said Phelan, a tall, trim man of 27 who runs a mortgage company headquartered in the Exton Commons. "I'm alive for a reason."

Monday marks the fifth anniversary of the day that terrorists crashed hijacked planes into the towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Shanksville, Somerset County, taking some 3,000 lives.

For Phelan, the cache of taking brokerage classes on the 61st floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center was something worth bragging about. The youngest of three sons, Phelan phoned home to his parents in West Bradford just to let them know life was good, that he was on his way.

"I was in the financial center of the world," Phelan said.

Standing in his new pricey Bostonian shoes, Phelan was in a lobby outside the training area on a 10-minute break between classes that morning. He was thinking about what his father had told him; break in those Bostonians. They won't be comfortable until you do.

But on that day, foot comfort was not a top priority. He was, after all, taking classes in mutual funds, bonds and diversified investments from Morgan Stanley's brightest minds. Now he was on break, eating pastries and drinking coffee with those same heavy hitters.

Indeed, life felt good.

The building's outside walls were glass. Phelan and others were looking at the Hudson River on that sunny, late summer morning.

"At first it was raining paper, then burning paper," said Phelan, who at the time assumed a nearby office incinerator had malfunctioned. "The North Tower was behind us. We had no idea. We looked down and said we were glad we weren't standing down there."

A bell sounded and the trainees were called back into the class. But this time there was no discussion of diluted shares or price-weighted indexes. Phelan and the others were directed into the stairwell by Morgan Stanley officials.

"Some people wanted their laptops, their Palm Pilots but the people at Morgan Stanley were on the ball," Phelan said. "They told us, 'put down your coffee and get into the stairwell.'"

Five minutes of lost production can cost a corporation that size millions of dollars, Phelan said, but the company never hesitated. Everyone was evacuated.

Phelan said he was in the stairwell working his way down when Port Authority officials announced the North Tower had been hit by an airplane and everyone could "go back to their offices. I watched people get out of the stairwell."

But not Phelan. Morgan Stanley had been so emphatic that they evacuate the building, he kept going.

By the time he had had worked his way down 15 flights, the South Tower was hit. Phelan was thrown into the corner of the stairwell. The walls of the stairwell cracked. When he stood up, he was holding chunks of plaster in his hands. Phelan said he knew things were serious. The stairwell was in the middle of the building.

At the time, he said he assumed the North Tower had fallen into the South Tower. He had no way of knowing a second hijacked airliner had been flown into the World Trade Center, this time hitting the 70th floor of the South Tower, some 15-20 floors above Phelan.

"The building rocked back and forth," Phelan said. "Everybody around me fell. The panic level went through the roof."

After that, the pace picked up and "we were going faster and faster and I'm still wearing my new Bostonian dress shoes," Phelan said.

Despite the pace, Phelan, a former Eagle Scout, said he stayed calm and that the people surrounding him stayed calm. The group continued double-file. At about the 20th floor, the group started to count down, 19, 18, 17, etc.

"It was reassuring," Phelan said.

By the time Phelan got to the 10th floor, the stairwell was filled with smoke. He said he pulled his shirt off to cover his face so he could breathe and keep going to the first floor.

When Phelan and the others got to the first floor, their relief turned back to panic. They were not on the ground floor.

"We were two stories below ground," Phelan said.

Phelan said Port Authority officers directed them to two flights of non-working escalator steps and the survivors raced up to get to the ground floor and get outside.

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"If I have any regrets, it was the people I helped, the people who were out of shape, out of breath," Phelan said about people in the stairwell he assisted before moving on to help someone else. "They stopped and said they were OK, just needed a minute. I wish I had kept them with me longer. I had so much adrenaline, I could have picked up three people."

Outside, shattered glass was everywhere. Bloodied people were sitting on the curb, cut.

"There must have been thousands of people looking up like zombies, panic in their eyes," Phelan said. "We watched as people were falling out of the buildings, as they were running away from the flames."

The longer he stayed, the more debris fell.

Phelan said he could see the Empire State Building, a landmark near the mid-town hotel where he and other Morgan Stanley trainees were staying. Traffic was at a standstill. Public transportation was not running so Phelan decided it would be best to walk back to his hotel.

"There were 10 of us, it was a two-hour walk in my brand-new Bostonians," Phelan said. "It was our mission to get away and thank God we did."

As they walked, Phelan said he and the others looked over their shoulders at the smoke.

"I remember the smoke going down, down, down," Phelan said.

From the radios in cars gridlocked on the street, Phelan heard that first the South Tower fell, then the North Tower.

Some 2,759 lives were lost in the World Trade Center towers' collapse.

It took Phelan an hour and a half to get through to his parents, David and Mary Kay Phelan, by cell phone. What really bothered Phelan, he said, was watching people on the street gabbing on their cell phones while he was trying to reach his family in West Bradford to tell them he was alive.

Morgan Stanley was great, Phelan said. The company told him to take off all the time he needed, offered counseling and other help.

The training classes finally took place, this time in Parsippany, N.J.

Phelan became a Morgan Stanley financial adviser. On an average day, he made 350 sales calls.

But as the market cooled and with do-not-call legislation before federal lawmakers, Phelan said he was not happy in his new career. In 2004, he walked away from \$1 million under management to form World Trade Mortgage.

For Phelan, it is more rewarding helping people buy a home.

Now married and living in West Bradford, Phelan works 13 hours a day and employs five people.

"I look at the stupid things that upset people," Phelan said. "I don't get upset at the little things. I'm working to build a strong mid-sized company."

Phelan said he is also working to give back to the community and donates roughly \$1,000 to area churches each month.

Even five years later, the time in the stairwell still plays like a movie in Phelan's head.

"Thank God I'm here and can talk about it," Phelan said.

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